

Testimony-Michelle Precourt Debbink
House Regulatory Reform Committee
March 25, 2009

My name is Michelle Precourt Debbink. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you and to offer my perspective. I wear many hats in this effort to obtain smokefree air for every worker, every man, woman, and child in this state. First, I am an MD/PhD student at the University of Michigan Medical School – I am pursuing my PhD in public health policy at the UofM's School of Public Health. Furthermore, I represent several thousand medical students across the state of Michigan – members of the American Medical Student Association and Michigan voters! – who have declared their passionate support for a statewide law that guarantees 100% smokefree worksites.

As you have all heard many times, all of the latest medical and public health evidence confirms the deadly health hazards associated with exposure to secondhand smoke. I won't repeat these statistics and data, though – you know the statistics. Rather, I'd like to put on another hat I wear in this field – that of a dedicated medical student who worked her way through college, saving every dime in an effort to help pay for applying for and attending medical school.

Busy, hard-working undergraduates, like I, was often turn to restaurant and bar work because the flexible, after-hours schedule permits them to both attend class and work – there are few other options. I worked nights and weekends waiting tables and tending bar – before the era of the smoke-free movement. My bar was constantly filled with smoke. Public health data tell us that restaurant/bar workers are particularly at risk. Hospitality workers are 50% more likely to develop lung cancer due to exposure to secondhand smoke at work.

But let me put that a little differently. *I may be 50% more likely than anyone in this room who has never tended bar to develop lung cancer at some point in my life, despite never having placed a cigarette to my lips.* I distinctly remember one afternoon at the bar, cleaning windows: As the black-brown sludge came off on my rag, I couldn't help but think that the exact same grime coated the inside of my lungs and everyone else who worked there.

Restaurant and bar workers are people like me – your children, brothers, sisters, friends, and children of your co-workers, doing their best to make a living or to save for school. In this economy, suggesting that those who, like me, desperately want to find a non-smoking place to work should simply “find another job” is a hollow argument that disrespects these workers and makes light of the unemployment situation Michigan currently faces.

Now, as a medical and public health student, I implore you to take the necessary action that over 30 states – including our neighbors Ohio, Illinois, and Minnesota – already have: make Michigan workplaces smokefree.

I implore you to look at me and see the face of the American Medical Student Association – medical students across this state, asking you to help protect their patients from a dangerous health hazard. I ask you to see the face of public health advocates who know that, like employee hand-washing, hairnets, and mandatory water temperatures, smokefree air will save lives and protect health. But perhaps most importantly, I implore you to see the face of hospitality workers across this state whose health and lives hang in the balance. And I ask you to protect them, and every man, woman, and child in Michigan from the deadly effects of secondhand smoke.

It's far past time to act to make smokefree air a reality. Let's protect the health of Michigan's residents and pass House Bill 4341.

Thank you for your time.